

## “Weaving back trust into the social fabric”

Interview with  
Bernardo Arévalo de León

**Mr Arévalo de León, you have years of experience in peacebuilding, working in different roles with Interpeace since 1996. You were also involved in peacebuilding in your homeland Guatemala before and after the signing of the Peace Accords. In what way did the exclusion or marginalisation of certain groups fuel conflict in Guatemala?**

Exclusion and marginalisation were at the core of the armed conflict in Guatemala and have their roots in history. The Guatemalan colonial state was founded

**“Of course, such a system could only be pursued through the disenfranchisement of the large majority of the indigenous and mestizo population from the political system.”**

on the idea of the Two Republics. This strategy was designed by the Spanish Crown to ensure the exploitation and exclusion of indigenous communities while allowing them to preserve some degree of cultural autonomy. The independent Guatemalan state that emerged in the early 19th century continued to sustain different forms of forced labour and taxation affecting the indigenous communities, notwithstanding its formal constitutional status as a republic. The growing ‘mestizo’ population was also kept at the margins of society. The liberal reform of the late 19th century consisted of little more than a discourse about establishing a democratic polity. The country’s international economic integration was enabled by the establishment of a repressive state that guaranteed the availability of the seasonal forced labour necessary for the production of coffee. The economic cycle had been designed to benefit only the tiny elite that had been in power since colonial times. Of course, such a system could only be pursued through the disenfranchisement of the large majority of the indigenous and mestizo population from the political system. It was not until 1944

that the reformist governments of the ‘Revolutionary Decade’ began a process of actively enfranchising the majorities that had been historically excluded. Their democratic rule enabled the development of critical political, social and economic reforms. The previously subjugated population turned into citizens. The state was no longer the instrument of the economic elite but worked for the common good. Even so, it was only in 1947 that a Labour Code established basic rights and protections for the working classes.

In 1954, a counter-revolutionary movement orchestrated by the United States in the context of the emerging Cold War re-established authoritarian rule. The disbanding of democratic parties and workers’ unions, cancellation of land reform, and criminalisation of reformist political activism rolled back the democratic gains of the previous decade. In 1963, a military government cancelled the elections in which the reformist political parties were expected to win back government, and closed every possible avenue for peaceful political reform, leading to more than three decades of armed conflict between insurgent groups and a counter-insurgent state.

That is why the Peace Accords signed between the government and the insurgent groups in 1996 not only included provisions for the settlement of the armed conflict and the re-integration of the guerrillas into mainstream political life. It also included a series of part-agreements on substantive issues, addressing historical marginalisation and exclusion: the agreement on the rights of indigenous peoples, the agreement on the strengthening of civilian power and role of the military, and the agreement on socio-eco-

**“But the legacy of centuries of marginalisation and exclusion has not disappeared. The difference is that today we can pursue social, economic and political change by democratic means, and not through armed struggle.”**

nomic and rural issues, among others. The Peace Accords were a milestone in the country's history, putting an end to the logic of the violent state. It also changed the structures that previously enabled the state to enforce the marginalisation and exclusion of the majorities in society through sheer violence and repression.

But the legacy of centuries of marginalisation and exclusion has not disappeared. Inequality, poverty and lack of access to basic public services such as health, education and security continue to afflict the majority of our country's people. The difference is that today we can pursue social, economic and political change by democratic means, and not through armed struggle.

---

### **What have been crucial steps in encouraging people to participate in dialogue following the years of conflict?**

The first challenge the country faced was the legacy of fear and mistrust as a result of 36 years of armed conflict and a history of violent exclusion. In the indigenous highlands, communities emerged from the armed conflict with a torn social fabric and deep divisions between victims and perpetrators. At the national level, the public distrusted the authorities, which represented a state they had experienced throughout history as the source of violence and

**“The first incentive to engage in dialogue came from society's own exhaustion with the logic of violence.”**

injustice. ‘Horizontal’ trust between the different groups in society and ‘vertical’ trust between government and people are critical components of any democratic society. Governance is to be ensured not through the capacity of the state to enforce obedience, but through the will of the people

to pledge their allegiance to institutions that represent them and which they thus consider legitimate.

In Guatemala, this has not been a matter of ‘reconciliation’, as in the attempt to restore a condition lost through conflict. Our post-conflict challenge has been about the need to emerge from social traditions of violence, coercion and mistrust, into a new era in which the terms of a voluntary agreement for co-existence and collaboration have to be developed by all sectors of society.

Therefore, engaging in social processes that can contribute to the development of the values, attitudes, behaviours and relationships necessary to underpin healthy state-society and community relations is crucial. This involves ‘weaving’ back trust into the social fabric in every sphere of life. Dialogue – active engagement through listening and understanding – has an important role to play in achieving this effect. It is a key strategy for the ‘production’ of trust and

legitimacy, as well as being one of the basic threads in the resulting social fabric.

The first incentive to engage in dialogue came from society's own exhaustion with the logic of violence. The unprecedented levels of violence during these three decades, recorded in ‘Guatemala: Never More’, the report published by Guatemala's Truth Commission, the Commission for Historical Clarification, left society in search of mechanisms to re-engage constructively with itself. The second incentive was the signing of the Peace Accords. The fact that the country had been able to find a political solution to the armed conflict and that peace had finally arrived provided society with both the vision and the will to pursue constructive engagement. And the third incentive was the multitude of spaces for inclusive dialogue that were being established. In the various agreements, the parties guaranteed a role for civil society. By being involved in the peace process, civil society developed the capacity to organise, put forward proposals and negotiate with authorities and thus became actively involved in asserting the demand for inclusive participation in the shaping of social and political life.

---

### **How would you describe your own and your organisation's role in helping people to regain trust in the state and in creating a peaceful and inclusive society?**

Interpeace came to Guatemala to explore innovative mechanisms through which the international community could better engage in support of local stakeholders in post-conflict settings. From the outset, the proposition was that the reconstruction of the social fabric – values, attitudes, behaviours, relationships – was as important a goal as the reconstruction of the country's physical infrastructure. The sustainability of peace in such contexts would depend on society's capacity to substitute relationships of fear with relationships of trust.

Our experience throughout this process confirmed that this is a task only local stakeholders can properly undertake. Only they have the capacity to truly understand the complex web of interactions and relationships of their own reality. Only they have the level of commitment necessary to undertake the long-term, sometimes uncertain and always gradual processes through which a society is transformed, and only they have the insight and legitimacy to navigate the complexities and dilemmas characteristic of post-conflict political settings. And, by the way, it is good to remember that social change, which is what consolidation of peace is about, is a political and not a technical

**“Only local stakeholders have the capacity to truly understand the complex web of interactions and relationships of their own reality.”**

problem, and only local stakeholders can legitimately engage in the politics of their societies.

**“Social change, which is what consolidation of peace is about, is a political and not a technical problem.”**

Our approach is underpinned by a series of operational principles. The first is local leadership (beyond local ownership): the need for local stakeholders to identify, design and implement their own peacebuilding strategies,

with international stakeholders becoming enablers and supporters. This is necessary to ensure that any initiative is firmly rooted in local realities, needs and capacities. So our initiatives are built around partnerships established with local stakeholders who have the will and the capacity to play such a role. Another important principle is what we call Track-6: the need to avoid ‘sectoral’ approaches that focus on isolated social segments. Traditionally, the international community tends to operate through Track-1 approaches that engage exclusively with the political leadership. Track-2 works exclusively with organised civil society and Track-3 engages solely with grassroots communities, on the assumption that change will follow a unidirectional ‘top-down’ or ‘bottom-up’ pathway. Consolidation of peace takes place through the effective integration of stakeholders, relationships and dynamics encompassing the different realms and levels (1+2+3=6) into productive social interaction that enables change at different social ‘loci’. And a third critical factor is inclusiveness: the need to foster participatory approaches that engage all the various stakeholders – that means anyone who is relevant to the problem or to its solution – and encourage their pro-active collaboration. This is necessary to defy and challenge historical patterns of exclusion and marginalisation, providing a wider and more integrated social basis for peace-sustaining action.

These principles are reflected in the methods used by our teams and partners, such as Multi-Stakeholder Dialogue and Participatory Action Research, which adapt an array of research and dialogue instruments to the strategic peacebuilding needs of a given context. We support local stakeholders in facilitating collaboration across the different social divides and levels, breaking established patterns of exclusion, generating ‘new’ knowledge and fostering inclusive, cooperative and collective action.

Since 1996, Interpeace has been involved in the development of a series of initiatives in Guatemala which have promoted and sustained the principles of dialogic cooperation in society. It started with the first post-conflict society-wide dialogue, which attempted to reach a consensus on critical priorities for peace in 1997-1998. Between 2000 and 2003, Interpeace supported a participatory policy dialogue led by local institutions. For the first time, army officers, government officials, civil society activists and academic experts convened to agree policy recommendations for military conversion. It was followed by a similar

multi-stakeholder policy dialogue on issues of citizen security and then by an initiative supporting civil society participation in security policy mechanisms, a series of initiatives bringing together national authorities, academia, NGOs and youth in an effort to understand emerging violence and design preventive strategies, and a multi-stakeholder group of government officials, private sector representatives, civil society and social movement leaders whose purpose was to analyse resilience to conflict and develop reinforcement strategies.

In every case, our role is to create the space, convene the stakeholders and provide the methodological tools that enable them to engage in defining a set of common priorities and develop consensus-based policy documents, etc.

---

### **Where are the risks of international involvement, and how can they be reduced?**

By definition, the international community needs to do less and enable more. Well-intentioned attempts to put in place solutions that have worked well elsewhere fail unless they are truly ‘owned’ by local stakeholders in state and society. That applies particularly if they are regarded as ‘imposed’ solutions.

There are two separate dangers, as a matter of fact: the first is the risk of inadvertently strengthening patterns of exclusion and marginalisation. By working mainly with government, you may reinforce the very institutions and policies that promote exclusion. But it would also be a mistake to work exclusively with non-state actors, or ‘against’ the state. The critical focus of cooperation should be the transformation of the state-society interface. Cooperation with the international community should therefore be seen as an opportunity and an incentive to foster collaboration across the state/society divide, nudging the system into transformations that are supported by coalitions of ‘change agents’ across this divide. This can include fostering ‘inclusive governance’ at every level or exploring mechanisms through which different groups in society can engage in complementary activity towards a common goal.

However, this can create a second danger: the search for ‘inclusion’ in society needs to be pursued in terms that make sense to local stakeholders. It has to follow patterns that are conceptually and operationally sustainable and are built on the existence and empowerment of the ‘local agency’ that can lead and realise such change over time. This means looking for the opportunities, at every level, to establish new patterns of inclusive participation in a way that allows

**“The international community needs to do less and enable more.”**

these dynamics to ‘emerge’ locally rather than being externally imposed.

Supporting sustained transformation means identifying positive ‘change actors’, empowering them by strengthening their capacities, facilitating ‘spaces’ of

**“This may be a major challenge for the international community, whose operational cycles respond more to their own governments’ political agendas and their own societies’ technocratic traditions.”**

collaboration and interaction across socio-political, cultural and socio-economic divides, and providing technical and financial support for the solutions that local stakeholders themselves identify collaboratively as appropriate to their problems. Local ownership is not about ‘convincing’ local stakeholders that the solutions ‘suggested’ by the external stakeholders are the ones they need. It means allowing local stakeholders to lead the way to change and finding their own way towards

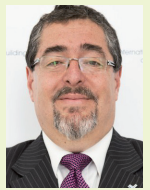
their own solutions, even if these solutions do not look familiar to their international friends.

This may be a major challenge for the international community, whose operational cycles respond more to their own governments’ political agendas and their

own societies’ technocratic traditions. It means recognising that social change happens through endogenous processes that follow convoluted paths and take centuries, not just decades, as Europe’s own journey to peace and democracy demonstrates. It requires the humility to recognise that for all its resources and experience, the international community can only have a limited understanding of local realities and should always assume that local stakeholders ‘know best’ when it comes to solving their own problems. And it requires them to develop the staying power necessary to support and enable long-term transformation processes that do not conform to the budgetary and policy cycles of bureaucracies.

#### **Dr Bernardo Arévalo de León**

is Senior Peacebuilding Advisor in Interpeace’s International Peacebuilding Advisory Team (IPAT) and has been working with Interpeace since 1996. Bernardo previously served in Guatemala’s Foreign Service for more than twelve years, including as Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs and as Ambassador to Spain. Bernardo holds a Ph.D. in Sociology from Utrecht University and a B.A. in Sociology and Social Anthropology from Hebrew University in Jerusalem.



## **Imprint**

The Development and Peace Foundation (sef:) was founded in 1986 on the initiative of Willy Brandt. It is a cross-party and non-profitmaking organisation. sef: provides an international high-level forum for shared thinking on the complex challenges of globalisation.

sef: insight is an online publication to accompany key conferences hosted by sef:. It presents interviews with international experts as well as opinion pieces on pressing issues of local, regional and global governance.

**Published by**  
Development and Peace Foundation (sef:)  
Dechenstr. 2 | 53115 Bonn | Germany  
Phone +49 (0)228 959 25-0 | Fax -99  
sef@sef-bonn.org | @sefbonn  
www.sef-bonn.org

**Editors**  
Larissa Neubauer  
Hillary Crowe

**Design Basic Concept**  
Pitch Black Graphic Design  
Berlin/Rotterdam  
**Layout**  
Gerhard Suess-Jung

Contents do not necessarily reflect the views of the publisher.  
ISSN 2566-7262  
© sef: 2017